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Echoes and artifacts

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ECHOES AND ARTIFACTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art and Design

by

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ABSTRACT

Architecture has many different contexts and meanings, but regardless of time and place, buildings act as a physical container of memory. This body of work explores the use of large facades as residue of a personal memory and uses physical deterioration to parallel the distortion of memory as a result of time and emotion. The work makes use of warping and tearing of materials and is created through the combination of large-scale relief prints, drawing, sewing, and the cutting away of materials. The exhibition includes an installation of fabric-based prints, a series of wall-based altered paper prints, and several artist books. The resulting series of works reminds the viewer of places of retreat and privacy while also sharing personal emotions, creating a visual collection of echoes and artifacts of memory and experience.



Figure 1 Mixed Blessings, relief and mixed media

BEGINNING

I have been exploring the creation of printed and drawn architectural facades to comment on the ways I view security, stability, memory, figure and space. Architecture has been an important force through time as a way of communicating power and thought. I used these preconceived forms together with abstract pattern and figural elements to compose a series of loosely defined self-portraits. I additionally use architecture to connect the monolithic way these buildings occupy space to the pervasiveness of thought and memory in the mind. My works reflect upon my own memories and engage the past as well as confront my current preoccupations and anxiety. In order to represent some of the more murky points of memory, I use drawing, stitch and cutaways as an editing mark throughout the work in order to show the constant reworking of personal memory. The result of my efforts is a series of works with multiple layers, colors and structures that consider these themes and build upon them.

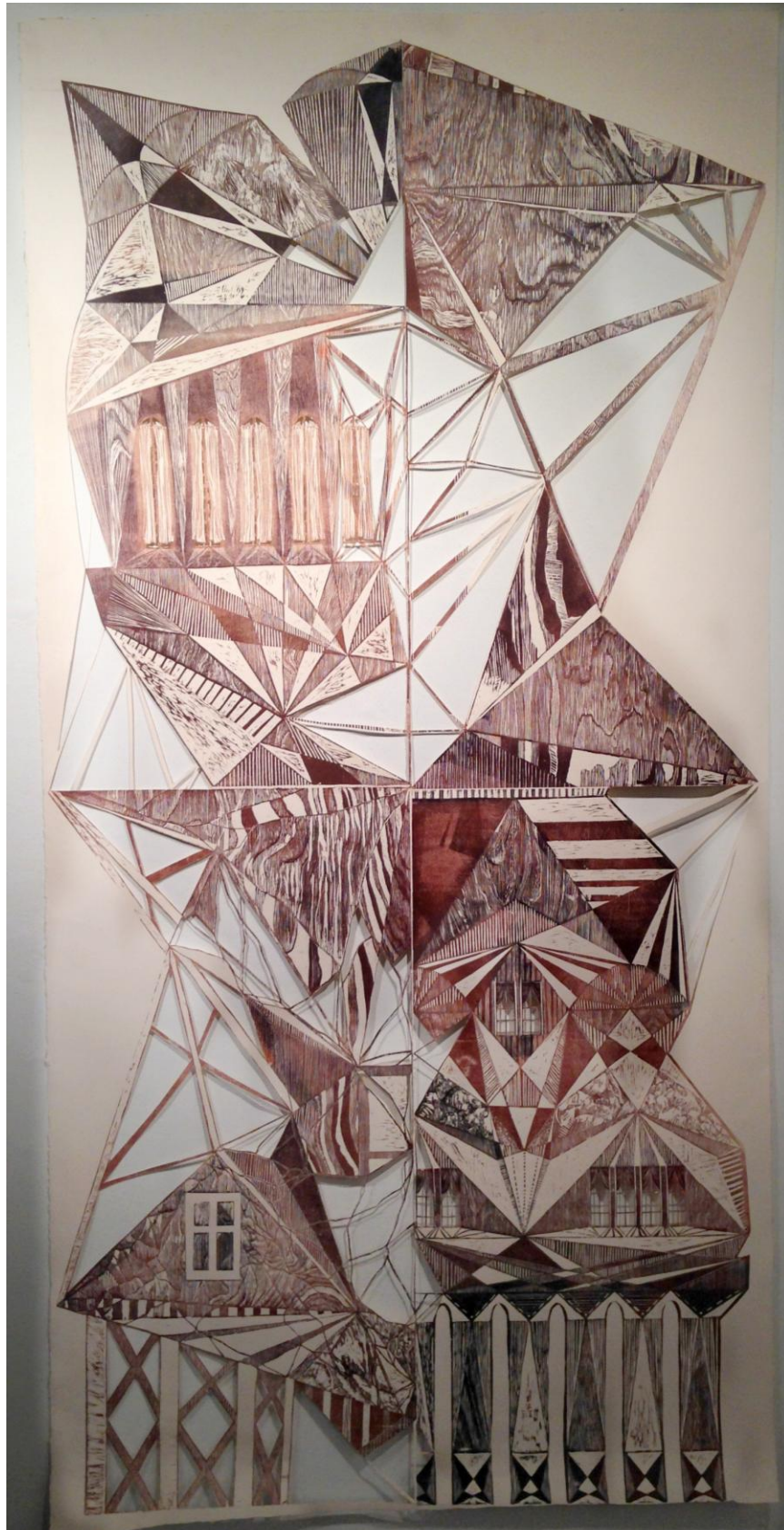


Figure 2 What Remains, relief and mixed media

MEMORIES (~~WINDOWS AND WALLS~~)

"But I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing.

Nothing goes away."

- Margaret Atwood (*Cat's Eye*)

Since I was young, I sought solitary retreat – hanging curtains and couch cushions in the corner of the living room for a place to hide my trove of shiny pebbles, broken jewelry, and acrylic gems; a closet with a small, delicately hidden journal for sleepless nights; or an aging library in the first hours of the morning filled with empty tables, WPA murals and outdated yearbooks. These spaces were sacred, special, and strangely spiritual. When I attended church as a child, I spent the time not listening to Mass, but with my eyes climbing the gabled roofs and examining the supporting beams. It was a building so spacious and free, yet crowded with people. I wondered what it would be like, high in the rafters, looking out of the windows or down on the crowd. Those moments, when I gazed at the roof and through the windows to the sky, were a private paradise more divine than any sermon.

When I first started creating facades, I dealt with memory. Previously I had been making figural art, but after moving from Kansas to Louisiana, with new people and anxieties, I fled figural imagery to deal with my thoughts abstractly and naturally landed on the spaces of comfort I remembered from childhood and early adulthood. Early prints and drawings made in graduate school brought in things I struggled to remember: shutters from my childhood home, windows from church, gabled roofing and attic windows. I especially loved the idea of walls protecting, letting in or keeping out and played with the idea of them crumbling down to show history and age. I gravitated towards architecture that told stories, forms that have an inherent weight of memory to them as buildings started and abandoned, ghostly frames marking the landscape. I created forms that were comfortable for me, and in the process, dredged up the sludge of memory that holds them down.

Fleeing again, my drawings started sprouting widow's walks, domes and towers. The subjects rested on architecture that I related to but not with which I was personally invested. I consumed early Islamic mosques, Byzantine churches, Gothic castles and medieval forts, letting them seep into my work. I was enthralled with medieval manuscript illumination showing architectural forms with a clear devotion to detail, how the artist twisted these forms unrealistically to show their heavenly nature, and the symbolism and meaning put into every stroke. There was, however, no erasing the echoes of the past and I began to see the forms themselves as echoes of my failure to eradicate them.

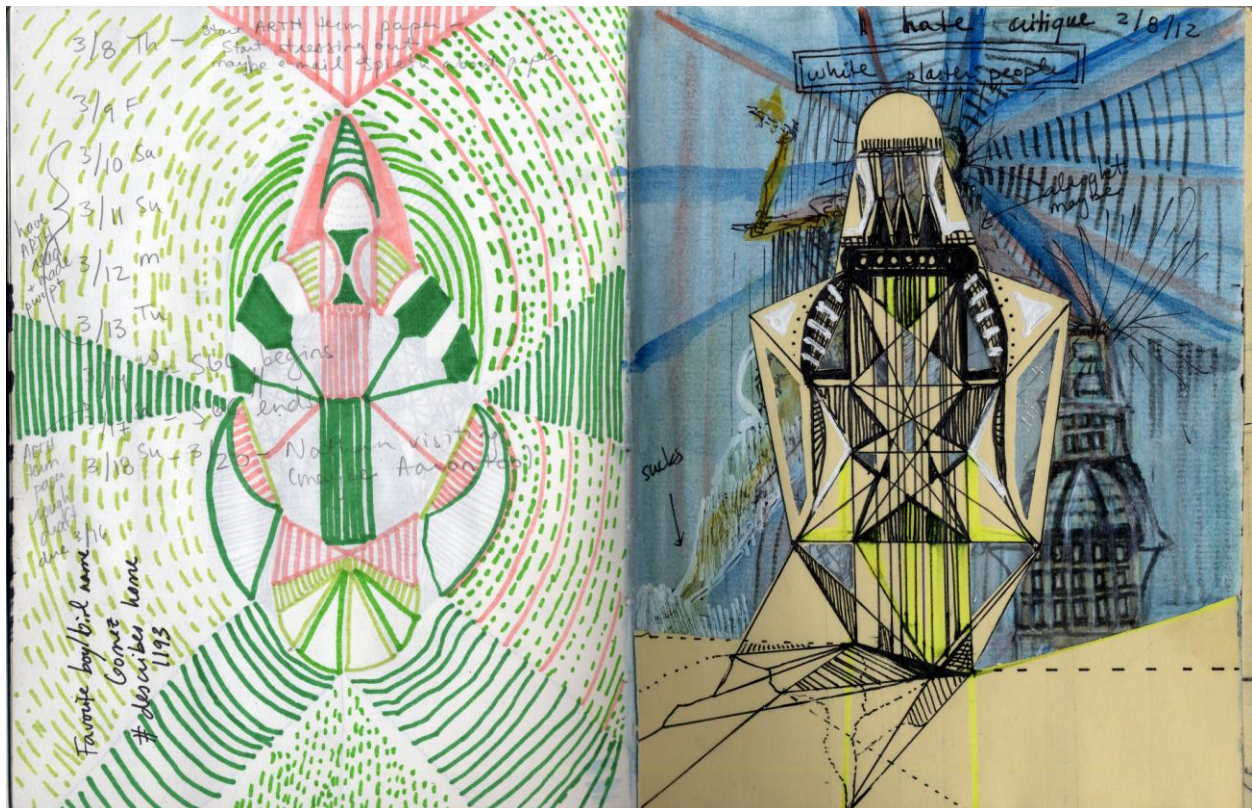


Figure 3 Reworked pages from "Stories with Unfinished Endings 1", ink, acrylic, and watercolor on paper

Memory is something intangible, but has a physical presence that intrudes upon an ordinary moment. I have scars from battles fought long ago, but as old wounds, they make themselves known at odd moments before a storm rolls in. Sometimes more context materializes; other times it lies hidden in the mists of the mind. As Margaret Atwood stated in the epigraph, *nothing goes away*. She describes time as both ethereal and physical in much the same way I view my work and the thoughts that inspire it. What are these places that inspire my work if not beacons of memory, artifacts I can use to partially recreate my experience? I use windows as a motif to show the many layers of memory, overlapping and overshadowing, hiding and revealing. This carried through to printing on transparent fabric to allow the facades to reflect their environments.

In the midst of all the artifacts and ruined architecture I created, I also started adding figures back into smaller, more narrative drawings and prints. I view them as representing little psyches searching for context and certainty in a desolate landscape of lonely vessels. The naked and vulnerable figures stand, looking at a creeping monolith in the distance and seeking the meaning behind it all much like myself as I look through my experiences and wonder at what still lies hidden. They often gesture at the forms in the distance dramatically, as if pointing out the distance and inaccessibility of the buildings. The existence of the figures shows different facets of memory than the larger prints and shows my own personal quest to reach and gain entrance.

My overworked and compulsive editing of materials reflects my undertaking and subsequent frustration in dealing with the bits and pieces. What began with my remembrance of the past ignited a desire to change it all. I began with my artist books, a private enterprise—something I could do and not show anyone, a personal need for more walls and more escape. When more people asked me about what I was doing, I felt the need to control the distasteful parts of my journals. I closed private areas with stitching to protect and secure from wandering eyes. Stitching became a way to disguise mistakes, cover up impurities, and correct myself.



Figure 4 Stories with Unfinished Endings 3 (installation view), mixed media

Editing became addictive as I became more self-conscious about my motives. With fabric, I worked the material to death -- patching, burning and tearing. In paper, I cut, drew over and pasted. I used old material such as drawings, sketchbooks and journals to create artist books as a way to reference past and present. As I altered and extricated my imagery, I associated this process with the destruction and rebuilding of those elusive, yet damaging memories I sought to avoid. I used stitch and line as a way to cover my life story with corrective marks. Troublesome fragments when stumbled upon were reformatted. The destruction felt great, a complete rejection of the past.

At the same time, however, I felt the constant presence of the very things I wanted to forget pressing into my consciousness. The more I covered up, the more I embellished the flaws and changes. Reality, memory and loss—like a potent virus—created a reinfection cycle and the resulting works reflected the very history I longed to erase. The innate ability of printmaking to encourage replication only bolstered the cycle. I used print to create multiple images of the same building, yet diverged from the template using drawing, sewing, and cutting, creating odd little mutations of the original form. The process of editing and covering up made the image seem more tangible and real rather than simply a figment of my imagination, reigniting my anxiety. I relished little differences from one side of the work to the other. Complete with all the editing remarks, I created a more complete self-portrait than I would have been able to otherwise.

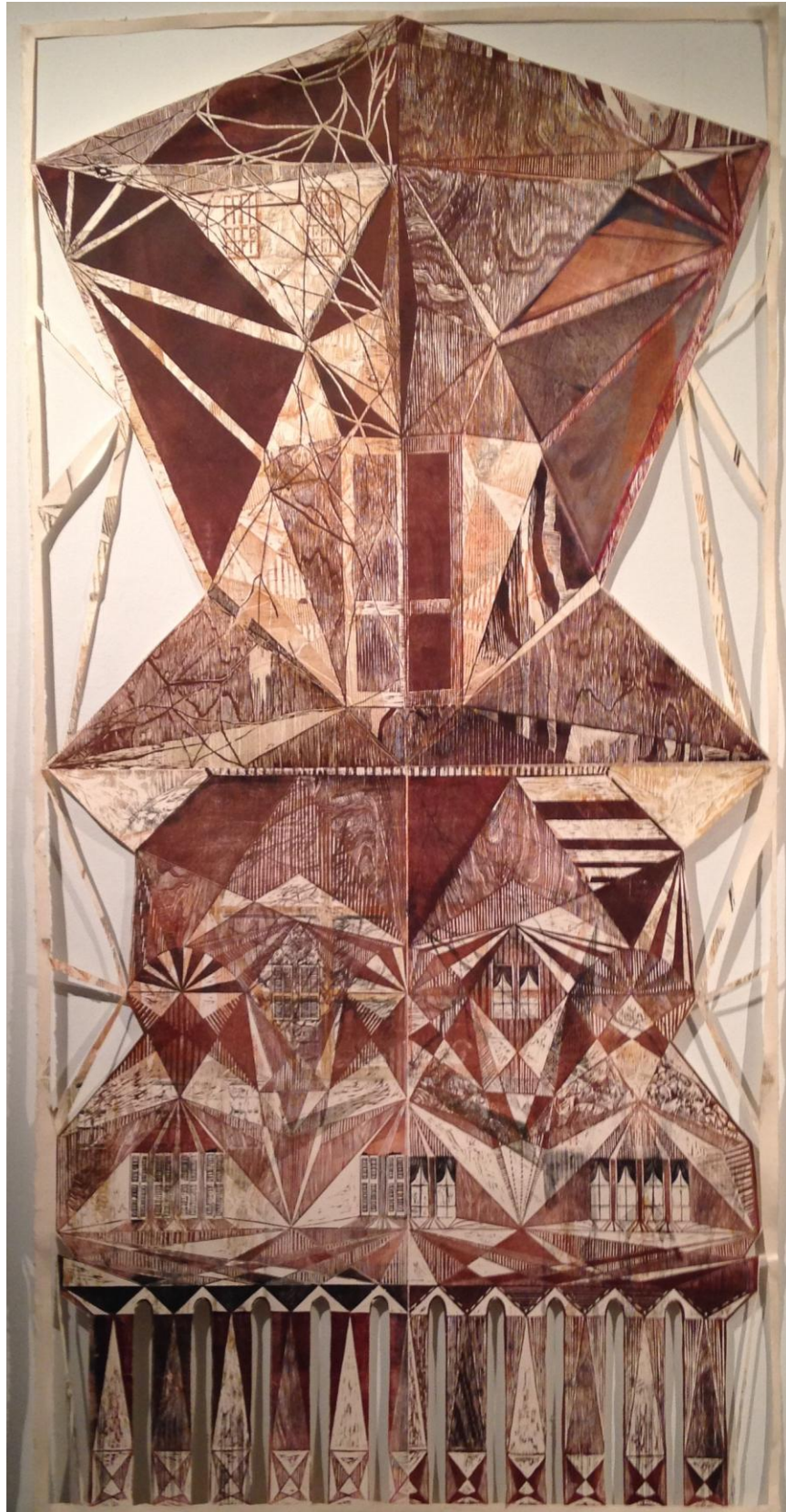


Figure 5 Memorial, relief

STABLE (IN)SECURITY

*'I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer house than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –*

*Of Chambers as the Cedars
Impregnable of eye
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky*

*Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands –
To gather Paradise”*

- Emily Dickinson “I Dwell in Possibility”

What does it mean for buildings to exist? Shelter is one of the basic needs of humanity. A tall edifice in the distance implies population, culture, and technology. They form gateways into unknown cultures; they emphasize the values and history of place. Architecture can be seen as a physical artifact representative not only of growth and culture, but also of thoughts, ideas and a collective corporeal memory. They reveal symbolic connections to history. When we look through ancient maps and drawings, we see forts and castles built for protection, and huge places of worship erected to show the power and force of the religion. Romans erected monuments to successful campaigns and ambitious emperors. Medieval Gothic cathedrals and early Islamic mosques dwarfed the landscape to symbolize the power and authority of religion and monarchs. After World War II the citizens of Munich, rebuilding their broken city, left the scars of the bombings on their government buildings as a reminder of the price of ambitious, unchecked leadership. It is clear that people put a great deal of meaning into their structures—they hold a symbolic weight that is unmatched. I regard my work similarly—they are monuments to times past, a reminder of what has made me rather than simply a place in which to live.

In the section’s epigraph, Dickinson talks about an exclusive paradise of her own. This roofless house full of windows and rooms is hers and for the few who understand her. She keeps her house like a fortress, meant to keep out rather than to welcome. Like in my work, we both use physical construct to convey abstract feelings. Dickinson feels the need to defend herself from the unwelcome eye, but antithetically to erect a beacon for like-minded kindred spirits. She describes the house large enough for a party, yet it seems exclusively meant for a handful. Similarly, my spaces are single occupancy—not meant for a crowd, but for personal retreat. My structures have a protective quality to them, but only for the few who gain entrance.

Like architecture, cloth is often imbued with a protective quality. Joseph Beuys sensed a kinship with felt, its protective qualities harkening to his experiences in the war. The Bamana tribe of Mali wraps women in *bogolanfini*, a protective cloth, to keep them safe after their ritualistic initiation ceremony. Similar fabric is used as clothing for Bamanan hunters to keep them protected from dangerous animals and spirits. They aren’t



Figure 6 Stories with Unfinished Endings 1, installation view, mixed media

alone; cloth with ritualistic and symbolic meaning has been around for the entirety of history. Cloth is used functionally to protect from the elements as well as to decorate and educate. It is the shelter of the body. But while cloth can be protective, it is relatively short-lived and hard to keep intact. It is a medium meant to be replaced. Clothing tears and eventually disintegrates. I used this in my work and created rips, tears and burns in the prints to mimic the natural deterioration of buildings. In my pairing fragile cloth with something hard and solid like a construction of stone and wood, it's an extreme, though still one that parallels with the natural deterioration and decay of structures.

Fabric is also sneaky—it's tactile and seduces viewers into handling a piece. The stitches I add to cloth or paper compel the viewer to hold and manipulate it. At the same time, there is also a greater fragility and thus the viewer is captured in a purgatory where they both want and should not touch. By its very nature, it plays with the idea of security and stability. I use the deceitful nature of fabric to emphasize the contrast between extremes. My work hovers between solid and unstable; safe and insecure; definite and ambiguous; conclusive and doubtful; transparent and opaque. I harmonize and diverge between extremes freely to create small battlefields, creating ruined buildings full of opposites in its wake. I create buildings that tower above the viewer, but move when you blow hard enough. The structure falls apart on one side, and stays stoutly together on the other. The windows are shut but the walls are open. This emphasizes the detriment of security as well as the benefits. I use the work to explore that difference, bringing in the elements of complete protection on one side of a façade contrasted with complete risk and destruction on the other side and seek a stalemate. Experience requires risk and complete protection creates complete isolation.



Figure 7 Installation view

NUTS, BOLTS AND BRASS TACKS

"Some people are pragmatists, taking things as they come and making the best of the choices available. Some people are idealists, standing for principle and refusing to compromise. And some people just act on any whim that enters their heads. I pragmatically turn my whims into principles."

- Bill Watterson

In the hanging of the works, I wanted the fabric work to exist together and create their own protective spaces for the viewers to experience; and the larger paper pieces and artist books to create context and narrative. Part of this was instinctual for me. The paper works and artist books felt like a different beast, requiring a different placement and display. The long hours of hand sewing and piecing that went into the fabric work made them more contemplative than the more visceral and compulsive paper pieces and books that I often flipped back and forth between, dealing with them as I felt that day. There is also a practicality to the layout. Fabric can move in the breeze, but large paper prints are fragile and subject to breakage if manipulated. The books too, while not having problems of fragility necessarily, need to be open to direct interaction. This informed a lot of my initial ideas about the layout in the gallery.

The resulting installation of the fiber work is meant to give viewers an inner sanctum, a contemplative place in the gallery that conveys my own act of reevaluation to the viewer and shares the feelings that I get from the spaces I use for inspiration. The work occupies a physical, tangible space viewable from either side, allowing for careful examination and handling of the changes and patches made to each piece. I instinctively created two of these areas, one at the beginning of the exhibition (the front room of the gallery), and one at the end of the exhibition (the back room of the gallery) in order to spread out the work for greater examination and because I felt like the two spaces would create two very different overall feelings. The one in the front room seemed more like an area for secret discovery, allowing for people watching and observation. The back room is quieter and more contemplative. Both of those feelings resonate with my own feelings in creating the work, so the viewer and I can share the same moment.

Given the aforementioned qualities of the paper work, I decided to place these on the wall, as they were already one-sided and highlight the changes made to them using the light of the gallery. Shadows bounce off the cutouts on the paper, creating an ephemeral continuation of line and engagement of space. I want them to seem part of the wall and yet distinctly marked by a border of shadow to call attention to the changes in the paper surface. The books are largely self-directed and interactive, and I had to keep in mind the usual connotations that books have as well as what I wanted the viewer to get out of the experience of my drawings. I like the feeling of continuity that books inherently encourage and wanted to give the viewer the sense of a story. I don't pretend that this body of work is the end of mine, however, so while the books play at the sense of a story, I want to convey to the viewer that they are mostly beginnings of stories, images that weave in and out of the different pages, and often don't relate to one another.

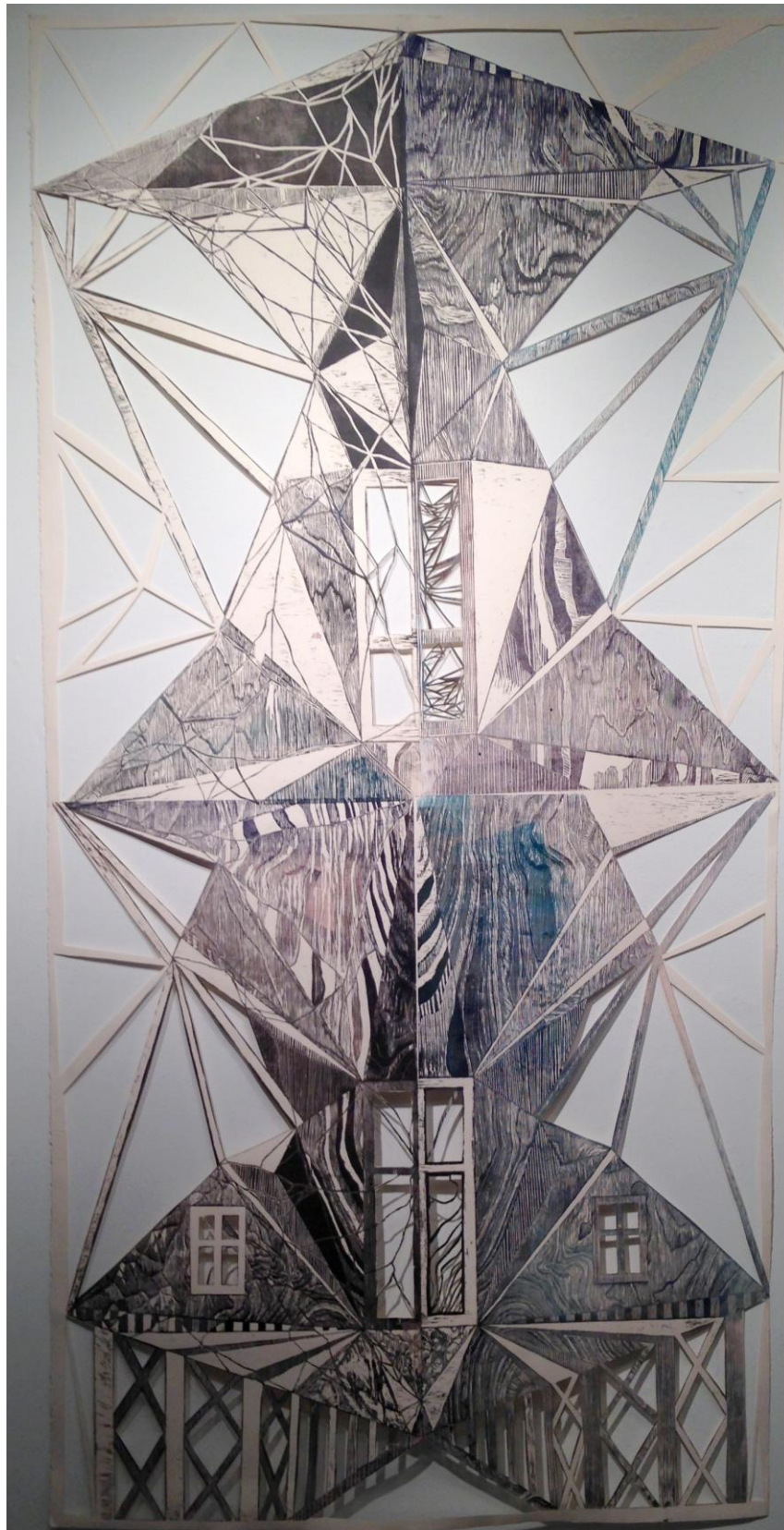


Figure 8 Stilt House, relief and mixed media

BEGINNING AGAIN

When I look back on the last three years, I would like to think that I have emerged a much changed person, and I would like to attribute that to my work. It is through this work that I have returned to the childlike joy of little hidden areas that seem to be created solely for my sake. It is gaining back that feeling of protection, but also realizing that there can't be complete security. Through this body of work, I am sharing the complications of the grey areas of memory, and in doing so nodding to the difficulties of the past as well as the potential good that came out of it. Having started with so many troubling scars, and so many blank areas, I now feel like even the darkest shadows have a light source, that blankness has a residue to it and I can begin to re-contextualize.



Figure 9 installation view

VITA

Molly Miller has a love of treehouses, ruined buildings, pillow forts and houseboats. She started at Kansas State University in 2005 as a Physics major, and emerged five years later with a double major in Printmaking (BFA) and Microbiology (BS), an abandoned third major in clinical sciences, and an unconfirmed minor in French. She decided to go to graduate school after having an awesome experience at the West Wales School of the Arts, left the success of her application up to fate, and finally landed in Baton Rouge in 2011 after an uneventful year working in the fast food industry. She plans on moving on with her life but to where, again, is up to fate.